

# the monitor

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## Utility-Scale Solar – Yes, But!

By Kevin Ramundo  
CFFC President

Utility-scale solar power is a rapidly growing business in Virginia driven by green energy legislation and technology advances that have lowered the costs of solar panels. The Virginia Clean Economy Act (VCEA) passed in early 2020 declared that 16,100 megawatts (MW) of green energy production, mostly solar, was in the public interest. This would be equivalent to the power generation of approximately 25 coal-fired facilities.

This sounds good, except that hundreds of solar facilities are projected to be built on tens of thousands of acres of Virginia forests and farmland to meet VCEA's expectations. Nearby in Spotsylvania County, the largest solar generation facility on the East Coast is being built on over 3,500 acres of forests to generate 500 MW of power.

Solar power developers are canvassing farm owners throughout the region with generic offers to lease land and are contacting local authorities about potential projects. Fauquier County has been contacted by at least eleven companies. The largest proposal to date is for the Fitch Solar project which would consume 1,000 acres between Bealeton and Morrisville and produce approximately 100 MW.

Fortunately, the VCEA leaves it to local jurisdictions to decide where these facilities should be built. Under Fauquier's two-step zoning ordinance adopted last year, if a proposed facility is consistent with the county's comprehensive plan, then a special permit application can be made. This spring, a relatively small 5 MW facility on 40 acres of active farmland was rejected because it did not comply with the county's comprehensive plan which strives to preserve prime agricultural soils.

The Marsh Solar project near Bealeton was rejected because the site involved active farmland with prime soils and was adjacent to land in conservation and agricultural and forest districts.

As this project illustrates, utility-scale solar poses a risk to Fauquier's agricultural economy, especially in the southern part of the county where the land is mostly flat. The reason is simple – developers of these facilities want to build where it is easiest and most economical.

Agriculture is a very significant part of Fauquier's economy. It is dependent on a critical mass of farms to support farming related services so necessary to sustain farming. If too much land goes out of production, agriculture becomes less viable.

The conservation community understands the importance of solar power, but it does not want valuable agricultural, recreational and forested land to be lost. The dedication of thousands of acres to solar will also threaten wild life habitats and viewsheds. It comes down to where these solar facilities are located. Rather than prime farm land, the Piedmont Environmental Council suggests that these facilities be sited on previously mined land, landfills, brownfields and other former industrial or commercial sites.

Open space conservation, the agricultural economy and solar can co-exist with thoughtful policies. 



Solar facility under construction in Spotsylvania County.  
Photo Credit: Hugh Kenney, Piedmont Environmental Council

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## Easton Porter Group Abandons Blackthorne Plans

By Kevin Ramundo

After approximately four years of effort, the Easton Porter Group (EPG) has decided to abandon plans to expand dramatically the operation at the Blackthorne Inn in Upperville. In early May, EPG put the property on the market.

EPG's decision was based on strong resistance by the community to its plans to expand the Blackthorne well beyond what had existed before, and what the county approved for the previous owner in 2014. The plans included an expansion of the historic restaurant and pub, the construction of a 16,000 square-foot event facility, and the addition of overnight accommodations for up to 78 guests. Early this year, EPG had a discussion with Mary Leigh McDaniel, the county supervisor in whose district the proposed facility is located, and she advised

them that she did not see a path forward for the project given its excessive scale and community sentiment.

CFFC would like to thank Mary Leigh for her commitment to preservation and conservation and dedication to being responsive to the community. We'd also like to acknowledge Goose Creek Association, Piedmont Environmental Council, and Virginia Piedmont Heritage Area Association who joined CFFC in opposing this commercial project in an area zoned rural/agricultural. And thanks to the many citizens who expressed their concerns about the proposed project and for helping avoid a large-scale restaurant, lodging and event operation on the outskirts of Upperville. 🇺🇸



## CFFC Advances Historical Status of St. James Baptist Church

By Susan Russell

In June the Virginia Department of Historic Resources determined that the St. James Baptist Church in Bealeton is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This determination is a direct result of CFFC's hiring of an architectural historian to document the church's rich history as the oldest African American church congregation in Fauquier County, and its importance to a village once called Foxville, which is now Bealeton.

Between now and October, Dovetail Cultural Resource Group of Fredericksburg will develop in-depth documentation supporting the church's final nomination to the National Register. If successful, St. James Baptist Church will be eligible for grants to preserve and improve the property.

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# Preserving the Vint Hill Barracks

By Julie Broaddus

Theodore Roosevelt said, “Nothing worth having comes easy.” This quote aptly describes the multi-year effort to preserve the barracks at historic Vint Hill Farm Station, our country’s first secret listening post. In March Fauquier County’s Board of Supervisors approved Echelon Resources’ special exception for the redevelopment of the Vint Hill barracks using federal and state historic tax credits—an important milestone to preserve the structures while creating 183 upscale but affordable apartment units.

For CFFC however, this preservation effort began much earlier. The former military base was already planned and zoned for redevelopment and many of the historic structures were run down. Preserving these buildings would take a huge effort—the kind that usually started once plans were already submitted for approval. But CFFC had a better idea. What if we could get the community excited about Vint Hill’s history earlier in the process?

In 2013 CFFC began uncovering and promoting recently declassified stories that brought these buildings to life—from intelligence for D-day’s success attributed to transmissions captured at Vint Hill’s secret intercept stations, to radio operators covertly monitoring Vietnam War protestors.

CFFC’s idea worked. Not only was the public excited by Vint Hill’s history, but Vint Hill’s potential developers were too. Despite all the positive momentum however, preservation of the barracks, the largest group of buildings at the station, seemed a hopeless cause. Refurbishing them was estimated to cost in the range of \$20-\$30 million. Six developers looked at the project



between 2007 and 2012 and concluded that it was not economically viable.

Prospects changed in 2018 when Fauquier County’s Economic Development Office received a call from Echelon Resources looking for eligible properties for their next historic redevelopment venture. When the barracks project was suggested, solid community support had already been established by CFFC, easing the difficult process ahead.

The hard work required to see this project to fruition is not over. Plans must pass muster not only with Fauquier County, but also with the

Virginia Department of Historic Resources and the National Park Service. Adding to the challenge, requirements of one approval authority are often at odds with those of another.

If the next round of hurdles is overcome, construction could begin as early as October. In the meantime, excitement grows among young professionals looking for housing that meets their lifestyle and budget and those who value the preservation of a national treasure. Thanks to all the individuals and organizations who joined with CFFC in this worthwhile effort. 🏡

A more recent picture of the barracks  
Photo Credit: Julie Broaddus

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The church was established by freedmen of former slave owner, John Fox. Its congregation first worshiped in a bush arbor on the current property, and then a nineteenth century hand-hewn log building. This was followed by a 1907 frame building that burned down and finally, the current stucco building built in 1922. There is also a circa-1922 Masonic Lodge (see picture on right) next to the church that was used for social events. The church's cemetery is included in the National Registry application.

Both the church and the Masonic Lodge are significant because they reflect the architecture of the time and the cultural development of the small African American community of Foxville. Many descendants of the founding members of both buildings still live in the area. 🇺🇸



## PLEASE JOIN US

Please support Fauquier County's oldest conservation nonprofit dedicated to preserving the county's rural character. CFFC is a strong advocate for open space, historical preservation and a healthy agricultural economy. We track every land use rezoning or special exception before the Planning Commission and are quick to engage when inappropriate development threatens to bring Northern Virginia sprawl to Fauquier. Planning Commission developments are covered monthly in CFFC's exclusive Land Use Report.

Fauquier County is under tremendous pressure to grow as regional population soars and residents flee neighboring, built-out counties. Help protect Fauquier's future by joining CFFC, a 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt organization. Visit [citizensforfauquier.org](http://citizensforfauquier.org) and become involved.